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THE ATTACK ON *LIBERTY*: A DAY THAT SHOULD LIVE IN INFAMY

Richard K. Smith

It was twelve years ago June 8, during the Arab-Israeli Six Day War of 1967, that Israeli aircraft and torpedo boats attacked the electronics intelligence ship USS *Liberty* in international waters off Sinai, killing 34 and wounding 160 of the ship's crew.

Israel claimed the attack was a "mistake." In truth, it is all too likely that the attack was deliberate, probably sanctioned by only a dozen or so persons in the highest echelons of the Israeli command. The *Liberty* was an intelligence collection ship with highly sophisticated radio equipment possessed of formidable "listening" capabilities, and she was easily recognized as such as a result of her conspicuous antenna arrays. The Israeli high command, or at least one important segment of it, probably feared that the ship's capabilities would expose their "defensive" war as being the imperialistic *Lebensraumkrieg* that it in fact was.

If there is any incident which illuminates the contempt with which Israel regards its American patrons, it is the attack upon the *Liberty* and everything subsequent to it.

On June 10, 1967, Israel hastened to assure the US Government that it was "prepared to make amends for the tragic loss of life and material damage." This diplomatic note was widely reported in the American press.

Ignored by the Congress

During the first few weeks after the incident, the Israelis seemed to be genuinely worried by the possibility of a popular US reaction to the incident. This concern did not last long. The US Congress almost ignored the event. Only two Congressmen questioned the attack, and years later they wished they had remained quiet. The American news media, captive as ever to Israeli interests, was not inclined to look twice at the incident. Within 90 days of the attack the Israelis probably came to regret their loquacious apologies and promises of compensation.

In May 1968, after five months of unseemly haggling, Israel paid $3.3 million to the next of kin of the dead. Most of the haggling had to do with the US including certain claims for "mental anguish" on behalf of the next of kin, to which the Israelis took exception. In April 1969 Israel paid $3.5 million compensation to those who were wounded.

The details of how these monies were distributed are shielded by the US Privacy Act. However, if the $3,323,500 was divided evenly among the next of kin of the 34 dead it amounts to $97,750 per aggrieved party. In fact, the sum was not distributed evenly. Widows with children received more than widows without, and the parents of the unmarried were awarded less than widows. Most of the men killed were less than 25 years old and were unmarried.

It is known that one woman, a widow whose son and only child was among those killed, was awarded a mere $20,000. As awards for "wrongful death" go in US courts, this is a pittance. An award of $200,000 would have been no solace for her only child, but the piddling $20,000 left her in a state of shock. This was the value her own Government put upon her son with respect to an alien government!

This woman subsequently withdrew from her friends and associates and slipped into a long tunnel of depression, had a mental breakdown, lost her small but successful real estate business, and in her aloneness considered suicide. In religion she finally found the first rung of a ladder which permitted her to climb out of her pit of despair. It is just as well for her and the other next of kin that they could not read the exchanges of notes between the State Department and Israel in which the Israelis spent months haggling over the expression "mental anguish"—to which they objected!

The Israelis subsequently sought to assert that "in making this full payment the Government of Israel was motivated by humanitarian considerations relating to the economic hardship suffered by the families of the deceased." In other words, it was *ex gratia*: an act of charity! It was not to be understood as admission of any "legal" responsibilities resulting from their having shot up the *Liberty*! The State department made a point of rejecting this ploy.

Sold for Scrap

Meanwhile, in July 1968 the US submitted a claim of $7,644,146 for the material damage inflicted upon the ship. Concurrently, the US was preparing other claims for its own compensation relating to (1) cost of medical treatment to wounded personnel; (2) value of lost services of the wounded during their hospitalization and recuperation; and (3) reimbursement to the crew for their losses in personal property. These latter three claims became an exercise in futility. Within a week of the US claim for the material damages, the Israelis replied "the Government of Israel is not liable for the damage claimed." The last attempt to press this claim was in September 1971, and from that day to this, Israel has rejected it.

In the years since 1967 the USS *Liberty* has not only been decommissioned and mothballed, but has been sold for scrap, a sale which yielded the US Treasury $101,666.66. Since 1973 the *Liberty* has ceased to exist. Now, in accord with their perverse logic of "new facts,"

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the Israelis can say to the US: "*What* ship?"

In view of the billions of US tax dollars, which have been lavished upon this nation which is not as large as Vermont and without the population of Chicago (i.e. prior to *Lebensraumkrieg* of '67), Israel's payment in full of the *Liberty* claims would have amounted to no more than an exercise in slightly imaginative bookeeping. Instead, the Israelis have indulged in a symbolic act of defiance; the US bureaucracy has been given a bloody "message" which shows how far Israel can go in violation of American life, property and national interests.

Contempt of Israel

For a people who expect the whole world to fall into paroxysms of grief over Israel's own dead and wounded, they have been singularly indifferent toward the memory of the Americans they killed. Fourteen of the *Liberty's* dead are buried in Arlington Cemetary, four of them in a collective grave as a result of there being so little left to identify. Every day, probably several times a day, the representatives of Israel cruise back-and-forth between their embassy in Washington and nearby Virginia, carrying their "shopping lists" to the Pentagon. They do all of their weapons shopping with US tax dollars. Crossing the Potomac via Memorial Bridge, they pass Arlington Cemetary. In all of these twelve years no agent of Israel has so much as tossed a dandelion on any of those graves.

As with the possibility of simply "juggling the books" to pay for the $7.6 million in damages to the ship, a gesture toward the *Liberty's* dead in Arlington would have been not only a good stroke of public relations, but an act of decency. The tenth anniversary in 1977 would have been the right time. But throughout this affair *chutzpah* has overuled courtesy.

The Israelis handling of the *Liberty* affair, from 1403 hours on the afternoon of June 8, 1967, to the present, frames an outstanding example of the utter contempt with which Israel holds the American people.

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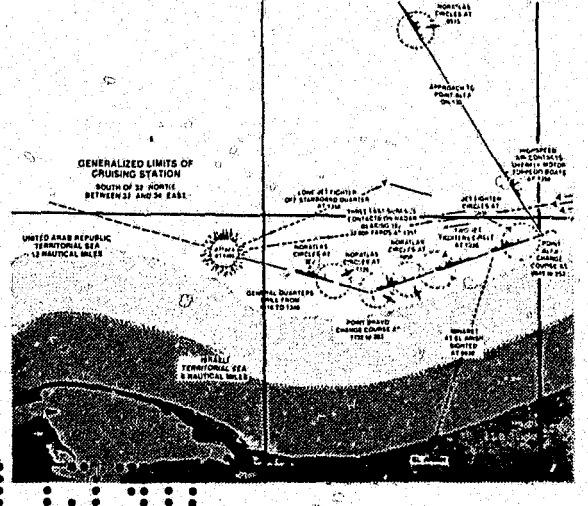
PRE-ATTACK AIR SURVEILLANCE OF THE *LIBERTY* BEFORE THE "MISTAKE"

Time		Hours Before Attack	Hours Since Initial Contact
0515	Noratlas transport circles 3 times	8:48	0:00
0850	Lone Jet fighter circles once	5:13	3:45
1030	Two jet fighters circle twice	3:33	5:15
1056	Noratlas reappears, reorbits	3:07	5:31
1105	Piper Cub circles, takes photos	2:58	5:39
1126	Noratlas reorbits	2:37	6:11
1220	Noratlas reorbits	1:43	7:05
1400	Lone jet fighter off starboard side	0:03	8:45
1403		0:00	8:48

This chart illustrates the development of the Israeli attack upon the *Liberty*. The only event not shown is an overflight by a Piper Cub type photographic plane which circled the ship between the overflights of the Noratlas at 1056 and 1126. It is seldom understood that the Israelis had the *Liberty* under surveillance for almost nine hours before executing their "mistake." The Israelis claim that they mistook the *Liberty* for an old Egyptian troopship, the *El Quseir*, which was only one-half the *Liberty's* size and had a wholly different appearance from the *Liberty* with its unique antenna array and hull markings. This would be like a person watching a stray dog sitting upon their front lawn for nine hours and then shooting it because they thought it was a rogue elephant.


GENERALIZED LIMITS OF CRUISING STATION
SOUTH OF 32° NORTH BETWEEN 33° AND 34° EAST
UNITED ARAB REPUBLIC TERRITORIAL SEA 12 NAUTICAL MILES
ISRAELI TERRITORIAL SEA 6 NAUTICAL MILES
GENERAL DIRECTION AND DISTANCE FROM HAIFA TO LIBERTY
POINT BRAVO CHANGE COURSE AT 1700 TO 350
POINT ALFA CHANGE COURSE AT 1900 TO 252

WORDS OF WISDOM

"Those of us who welcomed Begin's autonomy proposal when he made it at Ismailia 18 months ago are now being driven to believe that Arab critics had a point when they said it was a cynical trick. Israel's policy and the events on the ground are making a mockery of Camp David. They are adding to the burdens of the beleaguered Sadat. Worst of all, they are damaging the honor—and in the deepest sense the security—of Israel."

—Anthony Lewis
The New York Times